

# GHOSTS OF AMERICA'S GREATEST ACTORS STALK STAGE OF FOLLY THEATER, ONCE CAPITAL'S LEADING PLAYHOUSE

## HOUSE ONCE MECCA FOR STARS NOW DARK, ITS GRANDEUR GONE

Memories of Thespian Triumphs Dating Back to Civil War Days Recalled by Faded Programs of the Old Theater, Which Has Had Many Names and Many Managers—Burlesque Held Boards During Later Years.

By HARRY J. SHREVE.

FAMOUS fifty years ago as one of the leading theaters in the United States, the building now known as the Folly Theater, gives little or no indication of those bygone days when the most brilliant theatrical artists of this country and Europe appeared there in the leading productions of that period.

Only darkness holds forth where once John McCollough, Lilly Langtry, the elder Southern and Mrs. Gilbert drew thunders of applause from the theater-loving public.

The Folly stands at the intersection of Ninth and C streets and Louisiana avenue. The theater is vacant now. Many of the windows are smashed, the doors are sagging and the building is badly in need of repair.

Rats skurry across the darkened stage and the cupids that Ethel Le Van, the artist, painted on the ceiling smile down on the empty seats that were once filled with the elite of the city.

### HAD MANY NAMES.

The Folly has had many names and many managers. It has been known as Wall's Opera House, Ford's Opera House, Harris' Bijou Theater, Butler's Theater, the Majestic Theater and back again to the Bijou Theater. During the last ten or fifteen years it has been the scene of many failures and a great deal of money has been lost there by ambitious managers.

Now a sign above the entrance informs the passing public it is for rent. The auditorium that once resounded to the plaudits of gallant gentlemen and fair women, is silent. The lights are out, the play is over and the curtain's down.

The building was erected in 1856 by Messrs. Haslup and Weedon, who used it as a carriage factory. Messrs. Berry and Mohun purchased it several years later and used it as a combination warehouse and auctioneer rooms. During the civil war they fitted it up as a variety theater and ran it with indifferent success for a couple of years. Mr. Wall bought Mr. Mohun's interest in 1865 and shortly after the theater was opened under the name of Wall's Opera House.

Thaddeus Barton became the house manager for Mr. Wall in 1863 and while under his management some of the best known stars of that period appeared there. Among them can be mentioned Madame Marie Seebach, the great opera singer; Mrs. Scott Siddons, Mrs. Fred W. Lander, Jane Oates and Lizzie Webber.

In 1871 the theater was leased to J. G. Saville. On the night of December 5, the same year, it was partially destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt at once and leased to John Ford, who had formerly conducted Ford's Theater, on Tenth street, where Lincoln was assassinated. A glance over the names of performers who appeared there while it was under Ford's control is the cue for the old-timer to lay down his paper and let his eyes grow misty, as he dreams of the shows he saw at Ford's when he was nothing more than a kid.

### DOWNING A FAVORITE.

Robert Downing, who used to go swimming with Washington Topham and the other youngsters in Rock Creek, made a big hit down at Ford's playing a prominent part in the "White Slave;" Sol Smith Russell, appearing in "Edgewood Folks," was always greeted with crowded houses.

Other favorites were Madame Janaschet, in "Bleak House" and "Mary Stuart," Genevieve Ward in "Forget Me Not," Charles Bishop in "The Widow Bedott," Henry G. Richmond in "Our Candidate," the Kralffy brothers in "The Black Crook," Mrs. Charlotte Thompson, D. P. Bowers, James C. McCollum, W. H. Power, Robert G. Wilson, W. H. Lawrence, John E. Ward, Mr. and Mrs. George S. Knight, J. Polk, Haverly and his minstrels and Dion Boucicault and his Octoroons.

If you don't believe these were the names of the famous artists, ask Dad, he knows. Get him to talk of the days when he spruced up in his best and took mother

to see some of these performers down to Ford's Opera House. He will tell you that he only paid fifty cents a throw for the best seats in the house. Grandfather and grandmother used to travel down to see their favorites also. They knew and loved the people who bore these names for the great artists they were and they are not too old to remember them still.

If you are one of the present day theater-goers who dig in their jeans and pay three dollars for a seat to see some musical comedy, you'll be surprised to learn that the following actors and actresses played at Ford's at prices ranging from twenty-five cents to one dollar.

### SOME OF THE STARS.

George Frothingham, H. C. Barnabee, who appeared with the "Bostonians," then known as the Boston Ideal Opera Company; James A. Herne, in "Hearts of Oak"; Chauncey Olcott, Agnes Booth, Mrs. German, Annie Russell, Frederick Warde, Madame Rhea, Edwin Arden, Minnie Maddern Fiske, Forest Robinson, George Primrose, George Thatcher, Louise Davenport, Minnie Palmer, Billy Rice, Gus Williams, Billy Emerson, Nellie Mortimer and Bill Kersands.

Is it any wonder that Ford's was crowded nightly when you consider that such performers were appearing there at such reasonable prices? The Madison Square Theater Company was a great favorite at Ford's. A glance at a program of a bygone date reveals De Wolf Hooper playing a small part with that company. Others with him in the cast of "Hazel Kirke" were C. W. Coudlock, Mrs. E. L. Davenport, Miss Georgie Cayvan, Miss Ada Gillman, Celeste Rusk, J. C. Graham, W. H. Cahill and William Compton.

Another program, dimmed with age, tells us that Fay Templeton has smiled from behind the footlights at Ford's. It has not been so long ago since we were cheering her down at the National Theater. It seems only yesterday when we saw and applauded William Gillette and E. M. Holland at the same theater. Years ago they held the rapt attention of Ford's patrons. Charles Wyndham who later on in life was knighted by the King of England, appeared at Ford's Theater and he was not the star of the production he appeared with.

### HELEN WESTON DIED HERE.

Other programs show us the names of Eva Mills, Alice and Louis Harrison, Carnosse's Minstrels, Rossi, the Italian tragedian, Carrie Swain, Edward Thorne, Mrs. Jeffery Lewis, William Courtright, Lew Simmonds, Hughey Dougherty, Barry and Fay, Nell Burgess, Margaret Mather, the Hanlon Brothers, Agnes Herndon, George Adams, who appeared under the personal direction of Adam Forepaugh, of circus fame, Mr. B. Maccauley, Harry Buckingham, Sam Devere, Frank Cushman, Rice and Welch, Tom Sadler, W. G. LeMoine, Walter Lennox, John Burnett, Charles Wheatley, Clinton Stuart, Rosa Rand, James Galloway, Miss Sidney Covell, W. G. Ferguson, F. E. Bond, and Louise Dillon.

Helen Watson died at the old Kirkwood House, which stood where the Raleigh Hotel is today, during the week she was booked to appear at Ford's in "Jack Sheppard."

There were many others whose memory is still treasured by some of the older Washingtonians. Mr. Ford prospered and for a number of years his theater was the mecca for the public from the President of the United States down to the youngest who took his best girl and a bag of peanuts up to seats in the balcony. A good show with an excellent company presenting it, could always be counted on.

Over on the southwest corner of Ninth street and Pennsylvania avenue was Fletcher's theatrical hotel, and when the curtain went down on the last act at Ford's Fletcher's became part of the Great White Way of Washington. Groups of famous actors used to gather there on the curb and discuss their profession and tell mighty big lies to each other regarding the salaries they were

MRS. LANGTRY, "The Jersey Lily" (in bonnet), Sir Charles Wyndham and Minnie Maddern Fiske, shown below, are a few of the famous stars who helped make the old theater at Ninth and Louisiana avenue famous in years that are gone. The playhouse of hallowed memories has been deserted for months and is now for rent, its windows broken and its stage dark.



drawing down and the remarkable contracts they were offered for the following season.

Gambling was not barred in those days, and Fletcher's was the scene of some mighty stiff ses-

sions of the great American game. There was a saloon near the corner conducted by two jolly Germans, and this was the headquarters for the shining theatrical lights of that period. Each night the actors playing at Ford's would

assemble here, and with one foot on the brass rail, stories of past triumphs and dreams of future conquests were told and retold while the German bartender slid the foaming glasses along the wooden bar and timidly touched

the great personages for a couple of paces for the next night's performances.

Time is no respecter of persons or places, and, glancing at the records, we find that Ford's Opera House went out of existence in

Burlesque and Variety Shows Were Featured in the Declining Years of the Theater Which Has Had a Long and Varied Career Under Different Names and as Many Different Managers—Many Popular Players Made Debut There Not So Long Ago.

1888. In that year the theater was leased to P. Harris. The sign that had been up so many years came down, and in its place went up one bearing the name of The Bijou Theater. The theater was opened with a matinee performance on February 15 of the same year. The first production appearing there under the new management was Dion Boucicault's "The Shaughraun."

The policy of the house was changed, and it was evident from the start that the management was going to pin its faith to the good old "blood and thunder" drama. Instead of the great stars who formerly held sway there, the patrons were now introduced to the villain with a heavy mustache and the handsome hero who got it in the neck until the last act.

### WELTER OF CRIME.

A half dozen stage murders were committed nightly behind the footlights at the Bijou. Mortgages were foreclosed, old folks were driven from home, and the young women wearing dark cloaks over their heads were always struggling through blinding snowstorms. The price of peanuts went up, and those folks who wanted action in the plays they went to see, were delighted with the character of the production appearing there.

The very names of the plays gave promise that there was something doing. Here are a few of them: "Alone in London," "The Streets of New York," "In Darkest Russia," "The Galley Slave," "Across the Pacific," "The Still Alarm," "The Fast Mail," "The Lights of London," "East Lynne," "Lightning Lou," "The World Against Her," "Peter Jackson in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,'" "Tom, the Newsboy," "Adrift in New York," and "The White Slave." Some of the performers appearing in them included N. S. Woods, Florence Bindlay, Charles T. Ellis, Mattie Vickers, and Ada Gray.

### ENTER THE MELODRAMA.

In 1892 L. Brittan and T. F. Dean became associated with Mr. Harris in the management of the theater. The melodramatic policy was continued, and the boys and girls munched their peanuts and hung around the stage door after the performance to see the great ones come out just as you used to do, down at the old Academy of Music on D street.

We next find a Mr. Butler managing the destinies of the theater. Butler was noted for his genial smile and a huge diamond he wore in his tie. Under his control, the Bijou continued to do good business with the same class of attractions.

Willie and Eddie Fowler drifted along about this time and beamed on the patrons from the box office window. Willie is still beaming down at the National and Eddie was well-known at the Columbia before that theater became a moving picture house.

In the course of time Mr. Butler took his departure and as the years flew by other managers came and went. Then one day John Grieves dropped into town, looked over the field and thought it good. He interested Mr. Arthur Johnson, Jerry Ritter and Charles H. Harris in his plans and soon after the Bijou opened up with a burlesque stock company that soon had the male theater-goers of the city ordering their seats two and three weeks in advance.

The company grew famous in six months. Prices were raised again and again and still the crowds packed the theater nightly. Grieves believed in giving his patrons the best and many of the performers who appeared in his stock company are now playing in the first class theaters of the country.

### LOTTIE GILSON RECALLED.

Among the artists booked for his theater can be mentioned Joe Howard, McIntyre and Heath, Emma Carus, Lottie Gilson, Ben Welch, Bert Leslie, Susie Rosamora, Ida Mullie, James and Bonnie Thornton, the Great Lafayette, Nina Collins, Flora Parker (now Mrs. Carter De Haven), Pauline Moran, Sam Adams, Billy Watson, Nat Willis, Barry Thompson, Annie Carter, Frank Bush, Truly Shattuck, Bryan Harlin, Carl Anderson, Clara and Minnie Higgins, and Margie Hilton, Dot, Davenport, the Brown Sisters, and Clara Adams. Billy Madden was the stage manager.

Sam Kinsley, one of the famous old timers, was boss of the box office and he used to complain that he had to stay up all night counting the money that was

pushed in through the box office window all day.

Success turned the heads of the partners. They began to question whether Grieves was not paying too much money for the act; he was booking. Finally there was a rupture between them and John packed up his suit case and left for New York. A new manager was installed. The character of the performances began to deteriorate and the crowds began to drift away. This kept up for some time until at last the ghost refused to walk, the doors were closed and the company disbanded.

A Mr. Wegforth, who had been identified with Buffalo theaters for some time, thought he saw his opportunity to make a great deal of money. He leased the theater and rechristened it the Majestic. The Majestic opened in a blaze of glory, with a packed house. The glory departed, however, and soon empty seats were the rule at most of the performances. Wegforth stood it as long as he could and then he placed the business end of a revolver in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

### LEASED BY J. L. KERNAN.

James L. Kernan, who ran the Lyceum Theater, had lost a great deal of patronage while Grieves was conducting affairs at the Bijou. After Wegforth dropped out, Kernan got in touch with the owners of the building and leased it for a number of years. He figured it would pay him to close up the house and kill off any future opposition to his theater at Eleventh street and Pennsylvania avenue.

On one or two occasions Grieves drifted into town and tried to get control of the house, but failed. Then some one who did not like our old friend, Ira LaMotte, got him to go down there as manager of the theater. Ira stood it as long as he could, but when even his carnation began to wilt, he took his dog and his cane and went away from there. It seemed as if Mr. Kernan began to develop a desire to see the Bijou open and doing business along about this time. At any rate, it was hinted that a sub-lease would be easy to obtain. Mr. Fox, a local business man, next opened the theater. In looking around for a manager, he met Jack Garrison and told Jack he was it. Jack took this seriously and assumed the white man's burden.

He got busy and opened the theater with a bright little stock company, presenting up-to-date burlesque. The shows were really good, but somehow or another the crowds refused to come. Mr. Fox and Mr. Garrison held a long conversation, and once more the doors of the theater were closed to the public.

Previous to that John Grieves had come to town and upon three different occasions opened up the Folly with burlesque stock. On each occasion the company had lasted just one week. At last even Grieves grew disgusted. He conducted the members of his stock company to the edge of the city, showed them the best walking route back to New York and took a job as watchman at the Arcade Market.

### NEEDED NEW NAME.

When the Lyceum Theater was burned down recently, the members of the Number 3 burlesque wheel found they needed a temporary home for their road companies. Once more the lights on the outside of the Folly beamed forth a welcome but the crowds refused to come in any great numbers. Even a band stationed in the lobby failed to draw them in. Garrison was the manager the theater on this occasion also and rumor has it that he was a very happy young man when the rebuilding of the Lyceum Theater was completed.

And so the Folly is now closed. Perhaps it will open again and once more ring with the cheers of a crowded house as some favorite takes his bows and makes his exit. It has had a long career of ups and downs. Successes and failures have been its portions. Great actors and actresses have trod its boards and won the hearts of their audiences with the wonder of their art. Mediocre performers have appeared there and been hissed off the stage.

Now it stands vacant, a gloomy relic of its past greatness. Who knows, but what the ghosts of those great ones of a bygone day come back in the stillness of the night to gaze on the scene of their past conquests!